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News Values and Country Non-Daily Reporting

Australia's country, non-daily newspapers present journalism graduates with excellent opportunities to get a foot in the door, experience a wide range of journalistic responsibilities and compile an impressive portfolio. However, tertiary journalism courses largely ignore the unique news values, issues and challenges involved with country non-daily reporting. Considering a large percentage of future journalists are likely to enter the industry on a country non-daily, journalism education's current attitude has serious implications for the profession. However, this situation cannot be rectified until these specific news values, issues and challenges have been documented in order for them to be integrated into pedagogical models. This article documents the country non-daily's news values, issues and challenges, and indicates their importance to journalism training and education.

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The first national survey of Australian country journalist noted that the rural news media had "different roles, functions and priorities", compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Country journalists themselves were seen to be a "different breed of news worker altogether" (Pretty 1993: 75). Kirkpatrick (1995: 219) also noted that country newspapers have "different audiences" with "different needs and values", which "shape a different product".

In examining the editorials of 25 New South Wales provincial newspapers, Kirkpatrick (1998: 100) found that in the pursuit of material and social advancement, the country press were not "card carrying members of the Fourth Estate" but instead were originally set up to fill a perceived gap in local representation during the pre-council era. He likened the country newspaper's historical function to the American term 'community-ism', defined by Chicago-based historian, Daniel Boorston, as the media's "preoccupation with the growth and prospects of one's city" (Boorston 1965: 134). Kirkpatrick noted that historically Australian country newspapers have operated within the most basic units of society: family and local community ... the nature of gathering

news demanded that [the country editor] talk to as many members of the community as possible, attend their meetings and, often, accept office so that their grievances might be publicised, their resolutions implemented. (Kirkpatrick 2000: xiii).

Walker pointed out Australia's country press had, historically, a function to promote and advance their community in both an economic and social sense. The country newspaper came to express an agrarian ideology which exalted country values and virtues against the greed and selfishness of the big cities.... One principle to which all country newspapers adhered to was the vigorous promotion and social advancement of their town and district. (Walker 1976: 176).

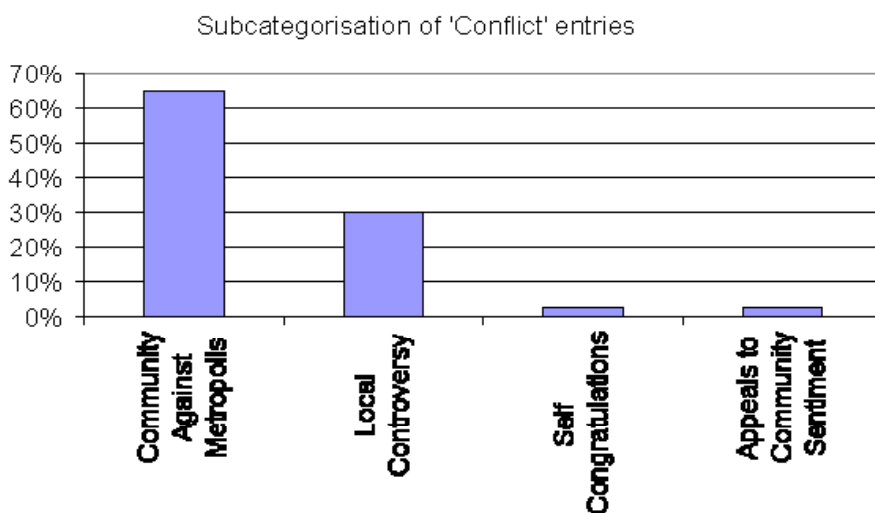
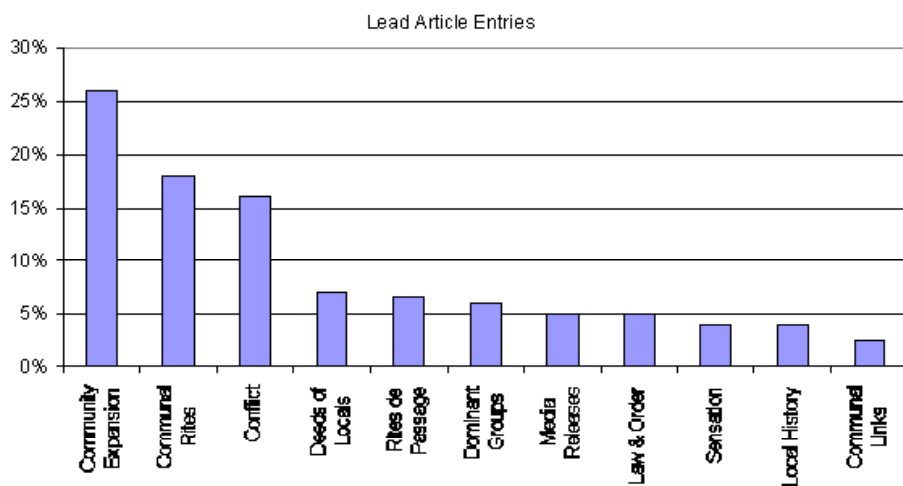
In his biography of Yarrawonga Chronicle editor, Alfred Ewin, Jeff Brownrigg noted the country press' role in advancing its town and district has evolved to encompass maintaining the community's values. It is no exaggeration to suggest that a local newspaper forms an organic part of a community's life. It usually serves an immediate need for various practical information as well as supporting a less tangible, even tacit, need for some confirmation of collective values. (Brownrigg 1997: 30)

Ronald Wild suggested in his 1983 study that the country newspaper's role in confirming collective values resulted in "support for consensus and status quo, rather than for conflict or social change". He further argued that they supported the "values, ideas and interests of the powerful", contributing to the "maintenance of social inequalities" (Wild 1983: 1).

Although the following article in no way attempts to support Wild's 'conspiracy theory', it does suggest there exists news values that set the country non-daily newspapers apart from their metropolitan counterparts. The article focuses on the author's 1999 investigation that researched the set of news criteria by which information is selected and rejected in country non-daily newspaper newsrooms, as compared to the news values emphasised in tertiary journalism courses.

The investigation involved a series of content analyses on 40 newspapers, taken from 10 different Victorian country non-daily news outlets. To offer a wide sample, various weekly, bi-weekly and tri-weekly outlets were selected from across the state. All newspapers were published between March 18 and April 31, 1999. Each article analysed appeared within the newspaper's first four pages, resulting in a total of 500 entries. Each article was categorised to determine which of 11 classifications of news content it best represented – 'Community Expansion', 'Communal Rites', 'Conflict', 'Dominant Groups', 'Law and Order', 'Media Releases', 'Deeds of Locals', 'Rites de Passage', 'Communal Links', 'Local History' or 'Sensation'.¹

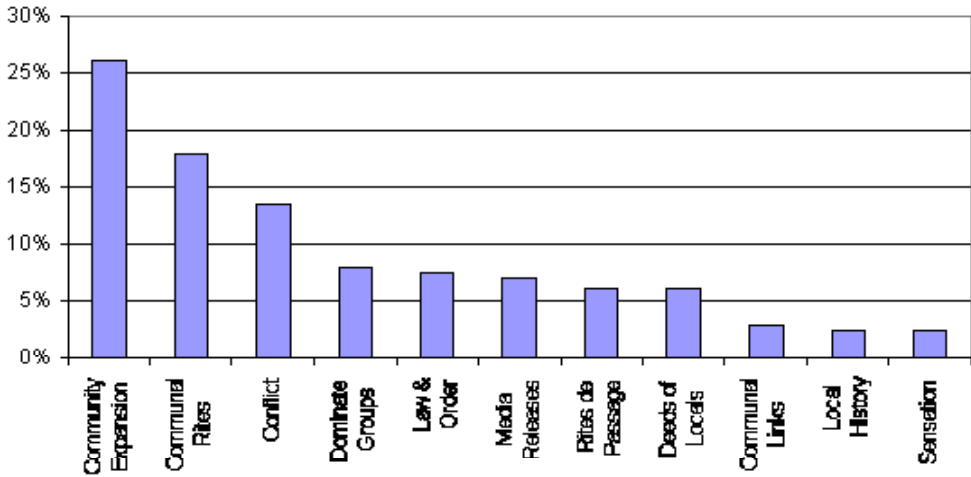
The value of each concept was measured according to its total number of entries, the page on which these entries appeared and their



position on the page. The content analysis found that concepts such as 'Community Expansion' and 'Communal Rites' were far more prevalent than 'Conflict' and 'Sensation'. Furthermore, 'Community Expansion' appeared more often as a front-page lead than 'Conflict' or 'Sensation'.

Content of country non-dailies

Content Analysis One



However, the content analysis recognised that 'Conflict' did appear in the sample, and with some regularity. The study therefore conducted a further content analysis on all articles previously defined as 'Conflict'. These articles were categorised into four sub-classifications – 'Appeals to Community Sentiment', 'Community against Metropolis', 'Self-congratulations' and 'Local Controversy'.² The content analysis of 'Conflict' articles found that the majority fell into the 'Community Against Metropolis' category, followed by 'Local Controversy', 'Self-congratulations' and 'Appeals to Community Sentiment'.

The final content analysis investigated articles defined as 'Sensation', sub-categorising them into either 'Extreme Played Up' or 'Extreme Played Down'.³ Although 'Sensation' scored the lowest number of entries in the initial content analysis, the subsequent categorisation found more than 50 per cent of these entries were categorised as 'Extreme Played Down'.

These figures suggested that the country non-daily does indeed have news values different to those taught in tertiary journalism courses. For a start, information involving 'Community Expansion' and 'Communal Rites' is far more newsworthy than information relating to 'Conflict', and even more so than that concerning 'Sensation'. Furthermore, information that involves 'Conflict' is more often news worthy if it can tell a story about the 'Community Against Metropolis', than information involving 'Local Controversy'. When it comes to 'Sensation', country non-dailies tended to de-emphasise the incident's extreme nature, rather than 'play it up'.

The content analyses discussed above were followed up with in-depth interviews with the editor of each of the 10 newspapers under investigation. The respondents were contacted by telephone after the content analyses were complete to tailor each set of interview questions according to each outlet's unique characteristics. These interviews were conducted in the respondent's newsroom during July and August 1999. This part of the investigation aimed to facilitate qualitative data by which contextual considerations could be taken into account, and provide insight into issues and challenges involved with the selection and rejection of news values on a country non-daily.

Comments agreed with the previous content analyses' findings that country non-dailies seek information different from that taught as news worthy in tertiary journalism courses. Geoff Hayes, editor of The Alexandra, Eildon and Marysville Standard identified the focus as being "the success of locals, council issues and the town's development". Others said:

"We have a community section where we run school news and social events – it's a very important part of the paper, and very well read. Because groups rely on the paper to get their messages out and, in a way, this is one of our functions." (Lynne Smith, editor, The LaTrobe Valley Express)

The CWA columns and those types of things are very, very popular. Not popular for all readers in the community, but clubs are very big in the country. It's a bit old fashioned, but that's what makes it appealing." (Paul Haynes, editor, The Wimmera Mail Times)

Steven O'Dowd, editor of The Colac Herald, summarised the approach as: "People are our number one news value – that's what we're mostly interested in. Then we'll go for clubs and groups and their special events. We also go for outside events and decisions that influence locals, but even then we'll get an opinion from a local housewife, rather than a politician telling us how outrageous it is."

Many editors expressed the view that, in the words of Gus Underwood, editor of The Kyabram Free Press: "We don't have reporters snooping around looking for conflict." Ellen Linke, editor of The Portland Observer, said: "We try to get good news stories in the paper – our readers prefer good news stories, but when something bad happens, we can't ignore it. But a positive story will always outweigh the negative in our paper."

Similarly, The Snowy River Mail editor, Keven Hennessy said his staff tried to be "positive" and "to make the paper a friendly choice for information. If someone is doing well, we want people to know about it. Country papers always try to give a happy outlook on the front page, but sometimes you can't avoid it."

O'Dowd also reinforced this perspective: "When you're working on a local paper, you're not after the sensational aspect. Readers want



Issues and challenges

to see people in the street, their neighbours and so forth. People are very interested in the day-to-day events of the town. It's not perhaps as exciting or sensational, but it's something they can't get from other papers, and that's our strength. When we stop reporting on local people, that's when we know we're in trouble!"

Each source agreed there was a unique set of issues and challenges involved with the pursuit of information for a country non-daily. To begin with, there was an inevitable personal relationship between journalists and their sources. Hayes summarised the impact of this on style and content:

"In a small local community you've got to avoid sensationalism, because you might hurt people you have to live with every day. You see these people in the street, buy your groceries from them, eat in their restaurants, they may even be your neighbour or your kid's teacher – and if you blow their stories out of proportion, they are (a) going to view the paper as inaccurate and (b) not going to give you information for any future stories. In a small community, you have to be very careful not to sensationalise."

O'Dowd noted similar stresses, especially in court reporting. "Colac's a small place, and if we did courts, there would always be someone appearing who was a friend or family member of one of the staff, so there's always personal pressures... besides, there's a lot of gossip value in court reporting, and we're not in the business of gossip."

Underwood similarly noted that it is difficult to report court cases in a "full on" style, as the newspaper faces people coming to the offices "begging us to leave the names of offenders out". Dilemmas also

emerged for journalists who had to resolve issues such as “is the paper prepared to take the blame for someone losing their job because we have splashed their court case all over the front page”.

Furthermore, there was the “communal responsibility” of the country non-daily. Bill West, editor of The Kilmore Free Press notes that: “Reporting in a country area, you’re more accountable to the community.” Others observations were:

“I wouldn’t publish information if it was going to harm the community. We’re here to inform the community, and make people feel they have a forum in which to have an opinion – we’re not here to harm the community.” (Geoff Hayes)

“We don’t try to glorify things, or focus on the sensational – accidents, murders and rapes – people might want to read about them, but we have a very elderly population, and they want to read about local personalities, rather than sensational incidents.” (Gus Underwood)

“Country papers have to give more of a community outlook. But if sensationalism means it makes a better story, then we’ll do it. But if it’s a bad news story, then you don’t want to go overboard. If the story is good for the community, there’s nothing wrong with adding a bit of colour to flavour it up.” (Kevin Hennessy)

A strong culture of community promotions emerged. For example: “We like our front-page leads to promote anything that the locals are doing... something positive for the area, to boost local morale. In a way, we have a role in making the community ‘feel good’ about itself. (Bernie Clohesy, editor, The North West Express)

“In some ways our role is to promote people in the area and promote positive things. If there was a factory opening and creating 20 jobs, then we’d go the whole hog. But if a factory was closing, and 20 jobs were being lost, we wouldn’t give it as much prominence.” (Gus Underwood).

“In a smaller community you have a different type of reader... and there’s a lot more feeling of community ownership, which impacts on what makes news. So, if we can give the community a boost in the arm, report on something they can be proud of, then we’ll do it.” (Jeff Zeuschner, editor, The Wangaratta Chronicle)

Then there was the lack of technology and the ‘tyranny of distance’. Bill West said that The Kilmore Free Press has no AAP or news wire service, cannot follow up news from competitors there are none, so: “We rely on people for news.... If people don’t tell us what’s going on, then it doesn’t get reported.” Others noted complications in court reporting. For example:

“We don’t do courts, mainly because there isn’t a court in town. With the court out of town, it’s just too inconvenient to cover it. Sometimes we cover the results of court cases in other areas that relate to us, but we never publish names [as a method of avoiding legal ramifications].” (Geoff Hayes)

"We don't do courts, but that's only because we're 100 kilometres away from the nearest one... I don't know that it would be worthwhile covering courts – I don't think our readers would hang out to read that sort of story." (Bernie Clohesy)

The in-depth interviews answered many of the investigation's questions regarding issues and challenges involved with country non-daily reporting. However, the comments of editors also opened up whole new fields of research, which were not within the scope of the 1999 investigation.

The most important of these in relation to the investigation's concern with news values was the implication that the country non-daily was partially responsible for law enforcement. This was particularly evident in the comments relating to court reporting. Underwood suggested the newspaper had a role in bringing offenders to account:

"We feel it's not fair to report on someone's court case if it's a first offence. So we give them a chance, and leave the report out entirely. Because in this community everyone knows exactly what everybody else has done, and to publish their names just holds them up to more public ridicule. It would be like a double dose of punishment. But if the same person kept re-offending, then we might slide their cases into the paper."

Jeff Zeuschner from The Wangaratta Chronicle made a similar suggestion when he said:

"Of course people don't want the misdemeanours of family and friends to appear in the paper, because it reminds them of their own, and the community's, failings. But I can't see how that's the paper's problem. They [offenders] shouldn't have got themselves into a situation in the first place!"

O'Dowd implied the newspaper (The Colac Herald) had a role in assisting police with investigations:

"We try to go for positive stuff, but sometimes there's bad news – and it's often big news – and you can't just ignore it. You have to cover it, and sometimes you have to use an emotional report, which may jog someone's conscience to come forward and give some detail that may help police."

The above comments suggest an exercise involving specific questions relating to the country non-daily's role as law enforcer lends itself to a future analysis of the country non-daily media.

Comments on managerial influence on editorial content in the country non-daily media also suggest this is an area for further investigation. O'Dowd claimed The Colac Herald's lack of court reporting was due to managerial influences. "After years of calls and threats, management just decided that court reporting just wasn't worth it.... The staff on editorial though believes both the newspaper and the town would benefit from court reporting."

Conversely, Haynes said management at The Wimmera Mail Times had “no” influence on editorial content. No other editor mentioned management as an influence on news values. Again, these comments suggest there is a need for further investigation, specifically focussing on the role of management on country non-dailies, and its influence on editorial content.

Also of note was the fact that competition from other newspapers did not appear to be a concern among editors. A mere one of the ten respondents mentioned competition as an influencing factor on news values. While O’Dowd held no qualms about delay publishing particular information in order to allow reporters more time to investigate that issue, he also conceded this could “endanger” The Colac Herald if another newspaper printed the same story first. However, he would rather “get all sides of the story” than publish “something substandard” merely because he “was worried” about being “out scooped”. Competition and its impact on news values in country areas is thus another under-researched area, which lends itself to future investigation.

Despite evidence suggesting issues and challenges and even basic news values are unique on non-daily publications, these are not covered in-depth in tertiary journalism education. However, this is the role many graduates will find themselves in. Although this may act as a disincentive to entering the country non-daily news-reporting environment, they are the places where graduates can gain excellent ‘hand on’ experience the moment they are employed. Graduates are required to take on more responsibility early in their careers, and often have to make the ‘hard’ decisions themselves.

Reporting on an Australian non-daily newspaper is “hard yakka”. There are no freebies and no resources for chequebook journalism or heavy legal people to offer advice on potentially defamatory information. Nothing is handed to the non-daily journalist on a silver platter. All this means non-daily journalists have to work harder to ‘get the story’, which, in some opinions, makes for better-quality news gatherers.

NOTES

1. Definitions of the 11 content categories are as follows:
 - Community Expansion: Any article outlining the growth of communal services or resources.
 - Communal Rites: Any article covering a regularly occurring event that involves the community as a whole.
 - Conflict: The reportage of change or the pressure for change.
 - Dominant Groups: Any article that would not be considered news worthy unless connected with a dominant group.

Conclusion

- Law and Order: Any article portraying authorities in control of a dangerous situation.
- Media Releases: Any article that is without by-line and indicates connections with large organisations.
- Deeds of Locals: Any article outlining ordinary townsfolk undertaking seemingly extraordinary activities.
- Rites de Passage: Any article documenting the life events of ordinary people.
- Communal Links: Any article integrating isolated townships into the main community.
- Local History: Any article describing the founding or development of the local community.
- Sensation: Any article focussing on the extreme of an incident.

2. Definitions for the four sub-categories of 'Conflict' were:

- Appeals to Community Sentiment: Any article rhetorically rousing communal loyalty or patriotism.
- Community Against Metropolis: Any article expressing contention with large non-local companies.
- Self-congratulations: Any article praising local individuals or the community as a whole.
- Local Controversy: Any article indicating internal dissent within the community.

3. Two sub-categories of 'Sensation' were defined as:

- Extreme Played Up: A lead article, with a photograph and regularly shaped of inverted triangle.
- Extreme Played Down: A filler article, without photograph and irregular up-side-down inverted triangle.

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